

ESL for Adventist Schools

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I find myself at a job I never imagined myself doing. Let me give you a little history. It all came about quite innocently. I can still remember saying during my final year at CUC. "I'm not teaching in a multi-grade classroom until I have several years of teaching under my belt." I really believe the Lord has a sense of humor. I have also found He is more interested in my growth than my comfort. After ten years of teaching, all of which were multi-grade, I was looking toward a change. I was dreaming of one of those cushy one grade classroom settings, (No offence to one grade classroom teachers. I realize that's an illusion). So, this past spring I found myself applying for the job of ESL teacher at Fraser Valley Adventist Academy. I'm not sure how a one grade classroom dream turned into an ESL position, but it did, and here I am.

So why does a school like Fraser Valley Adventist Academy need an ESL teacher? This year 2004-05, we have had no less than 25 students with ESL needs at our school at one time. During January and February that number escalated to 42. Our total student enrollment at present is 289. According to Lorna Johnson, our school accountant, the income provided by these students makes up approximately 35-40% of our working budget. I believe the school's premise in hiring an ESL teacher was; if we're going to accept them as students, we need to make an effort to meet their needs.

You only have to listen to the news to realize many international students come to study in Canada each year. According to the CIC (Canadian Immigration Council) in their paper the Monitor: Winter 2005, 31,546 foreign students came to study in Canada in the third quarter of 2004. This number is a small decline from last year, and yet still sizeable. Over half of these students are University bound according to the article. The number of those headed for secondary education or lower, in the first three quarters of 2004, was 12,233. I was interested to see that they were attending schools in each province; even the Territories could boast a few. The majority of students headed for Ontario and British Columbia, possibly because these are provinces they are more likely to have heard about. In a BCTF research project case study of an Elementary school in Coquitlam, BC, by Debbie Burchill, spring of 2003, out of 479 students in the studied Elementary school, 130 were ESL students. This number varies from district to district, however; I believe you get the point. International students are coming, and we have to ask ourselves if we are going to open our doors and provide good education for them, as well as ensuring our schools stay open with their support, or are we going to stay unprepared and miss an opportunity?

My job this year has been indeed a learning experience. My ESL experience thus far in my life is my own, having learned Hungarian as my first language, then my mother taught me English. When I was seven years old, my mother sent me to her family in Europe where I attended grade 2 for one year then returned to Canada to complete my education. I can remember the lost outsider-feeling. Since beginning my job I also attended a workshop by the Bureau of Education and Research, Presented by Kathelen R. Johnson, a nationally recognized ESL Instructor and outstanding seminar leader. This was a very practical and applicable workshop. I also took a University of Victoria course through BCOU called Principles of Teaching English as a Second Language, EDCI 447, during the fall term while I was teaching. My goal now is to obtain more education and I

have yet to decide whether it will be a Master of Arts in TESOL or TESOL diploma course.

Throughout this year I have been teaching students from kindergarten to grade 12. The students come to me in groups or individually as their schedules permit. Our goal is to keep them in as many of their regular classes as possible for integration, but also to provide them with ESL support during classes like French or spares. With the younger students we work on improving their vocabulary and conversational English with vocabulary cards, literature, LEA (Language Experience Approach), videos and discussions, readers theatre, games, songs, poetry memorization, and dialogue. The older students also work on vocabulary through literature, memorization, dialogue and readers theatre, but we also work on prepositions, idioms, and TOEFL (Test of English Fluency) worksheets.

I feel very much like a green horn, and expect to feel that way for a while. Working through provincial ESL standards I know there is much to become proficient at. In speaking with Eleanor Banister, ESL coordinator for the Langley school district, many of their elementary teachers have taken 30 hours in ESL training. I can see the reasoning in this decision. If there are more and more ESL students in the classroom, it helps if all the teachers are prepared. At this point I must commend the regular classroom teachers for their flexibility and willingness in working with these international students.

One of the great joys of teaching ESL is the relationships I have been privileged to build with the students. Due to the small groups, or one on one scheduling, we are able to build more than surface relationships. The opportunities to learn of their culture and to share my faith have been many. We have international students who are from Adventist homes, from varying protestant religions, and some of a Buddhist-Christian mix, and some I don't know about yet, but I'm looking forward to finding out.

So the questions remain. Is ESL here to stay? Will it continue to grow and become part of other Adventist schools regular programming? I wish I knew the answer. The reality for me right now is that it's here.

Resources:

- Burchill, Debbie (Spring 2003). Case Study: "School A" Elementary Coquitlam, B.C. BCTF research project. Retrieved from <http://www.bctf.bc.ca/education/InclusiveEd/ResearchProject/cs/Coquitlam4.html>
- Foreign Students. CIC Canada. The Monitor: Winter 2005 Issue. Retrieved from <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/monitor/issue08/04-students.html>